

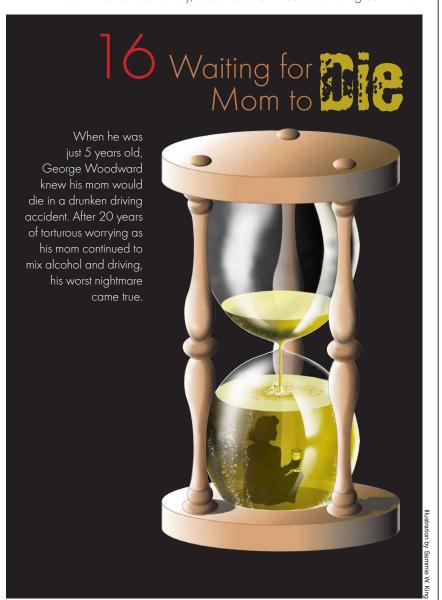


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An improvised explosive device in Iraq exploded and cost him his eyesight and his left arm. But that hasn't stopped Staff Sgt. Matt Slaydon, an explosive ordinance disposal technician from Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., from fighting back while undergoing a slow and painful recovery in San Antonio. Additionally, see what other threats are hurting our Airmen.



18 High on the Hog

Maj. Gen. Francis Gideon holds the dubious honor of being the first pilot to successfully eject from an A-10 Thunderbolt II, some 30 years ago. Even though the experience destroyed his aircraft and nearly killed him, the former test pilot remains a strong advocate of the aircraft affectionately known as the "Warthog."

TORCH TALK

Readers discuss tornadoes in Alabama, fear of heights testing at basic training, handling poisonous snakes while drinking, drunken driving, Torch archives, acquiring copies of Torch, and more.

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Cover photo by Tech. Sgt. Matthew Hannen **Back cover** photo by Tech. Sgt. Matthew Hannen

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FROM THE COMMANDER By Gen. WILLIAM R. LOONEY III

BEING A GOOD WINGMAN ... CAN YOU TAKE THE HEAT?

s we head into the "101 Critical Days of Summer" and the temperature starts to increase, history suggests that mishaps and fatalities will too! The summer season is traditionally the highest risk period during the year for accidents to occur; however, instead of just accepting an ugly fate, we can take our wingman responsibilities seriously and do something about it.

Unfortunately, the Air Force lost 19 Airmen (two from Air Education and Training Command) during this same period last year, one more than the previous year. Once again, the roadways proved to be the main site of fatalities. Eight of our team members died in automobiles, while seven more

lost their lives on motorcycles. The remaining four deaths resulted from off-duty sports and recreation activities, including two drownings, a dirt bike mishap and an all-terrain vehicle crash.

Already this year we continue to see tragedies that are preventable. Private motor vehicle mishaps are increasing, and alcohol use and unsafe driving practices are just two of the factors responsible.

So, what can we do about it?
AETC's "Operation Safe Summer
— Campaign for Safety!" runs from

"Already this year we continue to see tragedies that are preventable. Private motor vehicle mishaps are increasing, and alcohol use and unsafe driving practices are just two of the factors responsible."

May 23 (the Friday before Memorial Day) through Sept. 2 (the Tuesday after Labor Day). In order to make this campaign successful, everyone needs to use personal risk management during all activities as well as be good wingmen by taking care of those around us. I'm confident we as a command will do our very best to protect our most valuable resource ... each other.

Taking care of our own – our wingmen – on- and off-duty is everyone's responsibility. Through strong leadership, proper guidance and personal responsibility, we can all have a safe, enjoyable summer.

Silling



TORNADO STORIES

BRING BACK SOME 'BAD MEMORIES'

Your cover story "Nowhere to Run" (March/April 2008 issue, page 8) brought back a lot of bad memories. When I was 4, I was at my grandparents' house in Illinois when a tornado demolished it. My grandparents

had a cellar, so we were fine.
But for the longest time I thought tornadoes were giant, scary monsters. It was a terrifying experience that still gives me chills to this day.

Nevertheless, I'm glad you printed the story and the accompanying tips on how to protect yourself during a tornado. Too many people don't take Mother Nature seriously until it's too late. Hopefully, your article will get their attention and motivate them to make good emergency plans. Thank

you for your efforts.

Sgt. Sandra Gabel

Army Reserve

Your tornado cover story was good right up until the photo on

page 14. Then I saw the image of the nurse sticking her finger in the hole on the back of the injured tornado victim's neck and wanted to throw up. The story had already grabbed my attention. Then that photo, which

was at the end of the article, kind of turned me off. Was it really necessary to be so graphic? It seems at that point you were just going for shock value.

> J.R. Martinez San Diego

"Nowhere to Run" was an excellent article. I picked a copy of Torch up at the base dental clinic while waiting for an appointment and couldn't put it down. When my name was called to get my teeth cleaned, I had to sneak a copy so I could finish the story. I give my "props" to those people for sharing their harrowing experience after all they've been through; although, it makes me glad I don't live in Alabama or anywhere that tornadoes are a big threat.

Krystal D'Angelo Via e-mail



After losing their home to a horrific tornado, Wayne and Ilah Glover of Prattville, Ala., say they plan to rebuild, but that process could take nine months.

LETTERS TO TORCH Have a comment or

SERVING OHIO

A couple of our folks (from the 121st Air Refueling Wing, Ohio Air National Guard) read Torch while going through training (in Air Education and Training Command). They really liked your magazine. So we

(ordered) copies for others to read so everyone could enjoy them!

Senior Master Sgt. Timothy L. Caudill Rickenbacker International Airport, Columbus, Ohio

BUSINESS IS GOOD

Funny article and artwork ("Snake Got Your Tongue," March/April 2008 issue, page 6). I guess Torch safety magazine won't be going out of business anytime soon with people like this guy pulling these crazy stunts. Who puts a live rattlesnake in their mouth? Oh well, at least it's entertaining for the rest of us.

Retired Maj. "Manny" Vasquez
Phoenix



by Sammie W. King



Whoa! I freaked out when I saw the article "Pole Position" in your March/April 2008 issue of Torch (page 16). I'll be going to basic training soon, and I'm deathly afraid of heights. There is no way I could do what the guy in the opening photo was doing on a ladder 40-feet in the air without holding onto anything with his hands. I didn't even know the Air Force had acrophobia testing in basic training. At first I thought everyone had to go through it, and I was ready to call my recruiter and tell him to go to "H. E. Double toothpicks." I was relieved to find out that it only pertained to certain career fields. ... Needless to say, I won't be trying for any of those careers.

> P.I. Lane. Via e-mail

PERUSING THE ARCHIVES

I work in the base library at Kunsan Air Base, Korea. One of our patrons wants to get the article "Pilot Speak: You Can Learn a Lot from How 'Fighter Jocks' Communicate" from your September 2001 issue.

How can I receive this article in a week? Can I receive it by fax? Is it free? Would you please let me know the procedure?

> Yun Chin Kunsan Air Base, Korea

We can send requested articles and photos by mail, fax or e-mail attachment at no cost to the requestor. For more recent articles and photos, you can access the Torch archives on-line at www.torch.aetc.af.mil.



Thanks so much for sending me the article "His Right-hand Man" from the February 2001 issue of Torch (cover story about a teenager who accidentally cut his hand off with an electrical saw). It will tie in perfectly to my upcoming trainer development program (at Cardell Cabinetry) and rejuvenate our safety/ training programs. I really appreciate you taking the time to find it.

> Perry D. Henry San Antonio

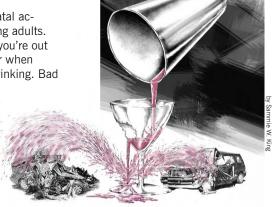
STUDENTS **DECISIONS** AGAINST

I am the sponsor of SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) at John Mall High School in Walsenburg, Colo. Thank you for letting us use an image from your magazine in our graduation advertisement. The ad will include the drunken driving illustration you published in the story "A Mom's Misery" (May/June 2007 issue, page 16).

The words that will be included with the artwork read, "We want you to enjoy and celebrate your graduation, but we urge students throughout Huerfano County to put safety first.

We don't want to cover any more fatal accidents involving students and young adults. Please don't drink and drive when you're out celebrating, and don't get into a car when someone who's driving has been drinking. Bad things can happen to good people when they make bad choices. Be safe and smart. and don't drink and drive."

Kimberly Liebchen Walsenburg, Colo.



<u>'I'VE BEEN WORKIN' ON A RAIL</u>

I am a first sergeant with the 189th Airlift Wing (Air National Guard) out of Jacksonville, Ark. I am also a safety manager for

the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad in Sacramento. Calif. I have used some of the great articles in Torch with my 2,600 employees. I also have had some of my senior leadership team inquire about receiving copies throughout the state of California. Thanks again for all the great stories.

> Shawn Chrystal Via e-mail



BROOKS CITY-BASE, Texas — The Air Force is in the final stages of development on a uniform that could buy battlefield Airmen precious seconds to escape a fiery death or life-changing injuries.

Members of the 648th Aeronautical Systems Squadron at Brooks City-Base in San Antonio have been working with the Army and combatant commanders since late 2006 to field a fire-resistant Airman Battle Uniform. Officials with the unit said the uniform could be in full production within two months, pending the actual award of the contract.

The uniform's arrival will be a welcome sight to warfighters who have been wearing various uniform items, such as fire-resistant flight suits, to limit their potential burn injuries if hit by an explosion.

"I'd rather be in (our) uniform than a flight suit," said Airman 1st Class Bobby Lam-

berth, a member of Detachment 3, 732nd Expeditionary Security Forces Squadron — a unit that trains, mentors and coaches Iraqi policemen on the streets of Baghdad daily. "We're not pilots; we're cops."

In addition to the desire for a fire-resistant uniform that looks like an ABU, a chief concern of those on the front lines is keeping the heat down.

"If (they) can make it as (fire-resistant) as the flight suit, I think that would be great," said Senior Airman Mark Smith, a turret gunner also with the 732nd ESFS.

That's where another current project fits in. The Air Force also is developing a fire-resistant combat shirt — a pullover designed with ABU-patterned sleeves and shoulders but a breathable mesh front and back to keep Airmen cooler under flak vests.

According to Lt. Veronica Dawson, the program manager at the 648th, the combat

shirt has experienced some delays but may be available for test wear around the same time as the fire-resistant ABUs are.

"When the contract is awarded, we plan to send some of the uniforms over to the (area of responsibility) so users can give us feedback on it," said Maj. Jason Hale, chief of the uniform program office at the 648th.

Hale said the fabric of the uniform is fire-resistant, so washing it will have no effect on its functionality.

"The design is based on the existing ABU, so we don't expect to make any big changes," he said. "However, our goal is to be responsive to the needs of our customers, the Airmen in the field. We'll be ready to use feedback on how to make the next cycle of production better if need be."

— Tech. Sgt. Mike Hammond Air Education and Training Command Public Affairs

TOO MUCH CHLORINE IN POOL LEAVES COMBAT CONTROLLERS COUGHING, VOMITING

KEESLER AIR FORCE BASE, Miss. — Several combat control students were left coughing, vomiting and having difficulty breathing after training exercises in the Triangle Swimming Pool here the morning of April 16. Excessive amounts of chlorine in the pool proved to be the culprit.

The base fire department responded to the medical emergency. Fifteen of the students were transported to Keesler Medical Center for evaluation and treatment. All were released that same day in good condition, according to Virgil Mitchell, 81st Training Wing chief of safety.

"The pool was closed for the season, but the combat controllers had requested to use it for training," Mitchell said. "Civil engineering worked on the pool the night before, but accidentally left the chlorine on overnight. Realizing their mistake, they notified the combat control supervisor. But he didn't grasp the severity of the situation and decided to train there anyway."

Mitchell said additional procedures were implemented to ensure combat controller training is not conducted at the pools without an official validation that the conditions are safe for training.

The safety chief warned that pools over-treated with chlorine can cause serious health and safety issues: skin and eye irritation, coughing, vomiting and shortness of breath, to name a few.

"If treating your own swimming pool, follow instructions carefully and check the test results," Mitchell said. "If chlorine levels are too high, don't use it. If you're not sure, don't use it. It never hurts to get a professional to treat and test your pool. ... Better safe than sorry."

- Tim Barela



Part of the elite special operations forces, combat controllers go through water training as part of their rigorous regimen. But some students at Keesler AFB, Miss., got more than they bargained for recently when a pool with excessive chlorine made several of the Airmen sick.

PATROL VEHICLE INVOLVED IN THREE-CAR ACCIDENT

RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas — While responding to a silent alarm April 23, a security policeman here tried to pass in the left lane and collided with a vehicle making a left-hand turn. The impact caused the patrol car to do a full flip in the air and land tires down on top of another vehicle, which was parked, ironically, in front of 12th Flying Training Wing safety office.

"It was 7 in the morning on a weekday, so traffic was pretty thick as people were arriving at work," said Keith Williams, who served as the safety investigator for the mishap. "The patrolman had his overhead lights going, but some people weren't moving over.

That's when he made the sudden decision to pass."

The airman first class, driving a 2004 Chevy Impala sedan, smashed into a civilian contractor who was in a 2007 Nissan Xterra sport utility vehicle. After flipping, the patrol car landed on top of a 1997 Buick Century.



After doing a complete flip in the air, a patrol car at Randolph AFB, Texas, landed on another vehicle, which, ironically, was parked in front of the wing safety office.

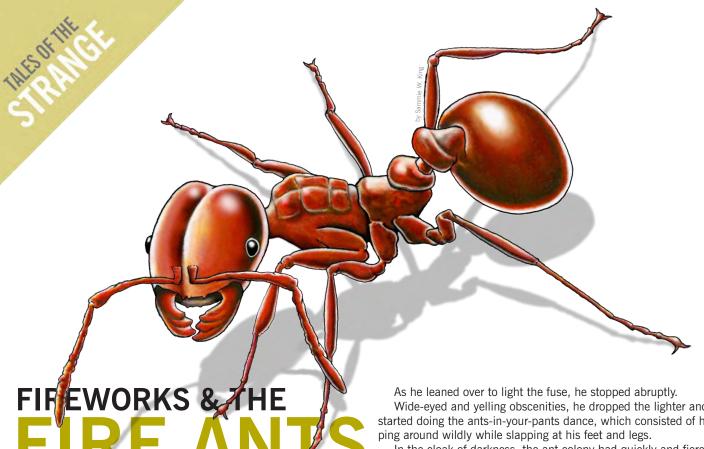
The security forces Airman and the contractor, who both wore seat belts, sustained only minor injuries, according to Williams. The patrol car was totaled at a cost of about \$18,500. Damage to the two civilian vehicles could cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000, Williams said.

According to the safety investigator, there's lessons to be learned here.

"For emergency personnel, an emergency response resulting in a crash does no one any good," Williams said. "For those who see emergency vehicle lights flashing or hear their horns or sirens, move over to the right as quickly and safely as possible,

so they can get through and do their job. And for everyone, don't just get focused on what's in front of you. Even if you are making a left-hand turn, it's prudent to glance in your rearview mirror before doing so."

- Tim Barela



A 24-year-old senior airman from San Antonio bought more than \$400 worth of fireworks to hold his own private fireworks display for the upcoming Fourth of July holiday. About a week before the big event, he decided to cull a small handful of bottle rockets from his mini-explosives stash to take care of a fire ant problem while putting a little smoke in the sky.

-IN-YOUR-PANTS DANCE

In truth, the Airman knew launching bottle rockets from a fire ant mound would not eradicate the ants from his lawn. But, if he could have a little pre-holiday fireworks display while frying several nuisance insects along the way, what would it hurt?

So that night, just after dark, he sauntered out into the yard armed with a fistful of bottle rockets and a long-nozzle gas lighter. He thrust the stabilizing guide stick of the firecracker into a rather

large ant mound, lit the fuse of the attached rocket and stepped back about 10 feet to watch the entertaining show.

But when the fuse burned down and the gas from the rocket "engine" spewed flame, the bottle rocket did not go airborne as planned. The Airman had iammed it too far in the packed mound, and it was stuck. It blew up with a loud bang and sent dirt, sand and more than a few ants in all directions.

Realizing his miscalculation, the Airman immediately "deployed" another bottle rocket. This time he didn't shove it nearly as far into the dirt.

Wide-eyed and yelling obscenities, he dropped the lighter and started doing the ants-in-your-pants dance, which consisted of hop-

In the cloak of darkness, the ant colony had quickly and fiercely launched a full-fledged counterattack that reached well beyond their mound. Since the Airman only wore shorts, flip-flops and a T-shirt on this hot, humid Texas summer night, it didn't take long for the swarming army to deliver multiple bites and stings.

Fire ants first bite with strong mandibles to latch onto their victim. They then deliver an attention-getting sting from their abdomen. They don't come by their name lightly either, as their venomous sting causes a painful burning sensation.

Panicked and hurting, the Airman ran inside his house to the master bathroom, where he stripped down and jumped in the shower to help drive away the stubborn insects. He saw several dozen stings that stretched from his toes to his lower thighs.

His lower limbs rapidly began to swell. Then he became dizzy and started shivering.

He was having an allergic reaction.

He got dressed, and his wife drove him to the emergency room. The doctor put the Airman on an antihistamine IV, and the

> would-be ant exterminator spent the next six hours asleep in the hospital. When he awoke at about 3 a.m., the doctor counseled him, not only for his carelessness, but also for forcing his nearly full-term pregnant wife to have to drive him to the hospital, stressing her and causing her to stay up with him all night.

Sore, weary and embarrassed, the Airman returned home. Later that morning, he tackled his ant-invader problem in a more traditional manner ... with ant poison, daylight and combat boots.

— Tim Barela

ARE YOU ALLERGIC TO THEIR STING?

Fire ants can cause life-threatening reactions in people allergic to them. More people have died from allergic reactions to fire ants in Texas than anywhere in the United States.

The ants guard their nest and fiercely attack intruders. Even the lightest touch to their mound brings them out in a fury. Allergic reactions include swelling, dizziness, shortness of breath and anaphylactic shock. Patients who experience severe or life-threatening allergic reactions to fire ant stings should visit a doctor or hospital immediately upon contact.

For more information on fire ants, their stings and treatments, visit the Texas Allergy, Asthma and Immunology Society Web site at www.taais.org/publiceducation/fireantsimported.html, or call toll free at 1-888-451-9752.

— Texas Allergy, Asthma and Immunology Society

ROLLOVER CRASHES

FOR 15-PASSENGER VANS MORE LIKELY DURING SUMMER

New research from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has found June through August to be the deadliest time of year for 15-passenger van occupants in rollover crashes. Statistics show that 31 percent of fatal rollovers involving 15passenger vans occur during the busy summer travel months.

In one of the worst motor vehicle accidents in Maine's history, 14 forestry

workers were killed in a 15-passenger van rollover in the summer of 2002. And in the summer of 2004, the Montgomery Advertiser reported that Kidz First Camp would no longer travel in a 15-passenger van, after a rollover into a ditch caused nine children to be injured.

NHTSA Administrator Nicole R. Nason is urging all 15-passenger van users to take appropriate safety precautions when taking to the road during this busy travel season.

"The last thing we want is a summer outing to turn into a tragic memory," Nason said.



NHTSA data shows a significant increase in rollover risk when the van is loaded with 10 to 15 people. This increased risk occurs because the passenger weight raises the vehicle's center of gravity and causes it to shift rearward. As a result, the van has less resistance to rollover and handles differently from other commonly driven passenger vehicles, making it more difficult to control in an emergency situation.

In 2006, 50 percent of occupant fatalities took place in fullyloaded vans. Fifty-nine percent of those killed were unbelted.

— National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

FIVE TIPS TO REDUCE RISH

Wear a seat belt. Over the past decade, 80 percent of people killed in rollover crashes in 15-passenger vans were unbelted.

Use an experienced van driver. Because a 15-passenger van is substantially longer and wider than a car, it requires more space and additional reliance on the side-view mirrors for changing lanes; does not respond as well to abrupt steering maneuvers; and needs additional braking time, to name just a few of the things that make it tricky to drive.

5 Know how to load. When a 15-passenger van is not full, passengers should sit in seats that are in front of the rear axle. Additionally, more than 15 people should never be allowed to ride in a 15-passenger van.

4 Avoid conditions that lead to a loss of control. Never drive while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Ensure you are well rested and attentive, and always slow down if the roads are wet or icy. Eliminate distractions, such as eating

or using cell phones. If you do make a mistake avoid the tendency to overcorrect.

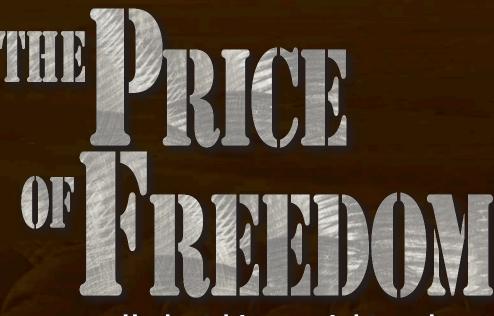
Properly maintain your tires. Ensure your tires are properly inflated and the tread is not worn down. Worn tires can cause your van to slide sideways on wet or slippery pavement. Improper inflation can cause handling problems and can lead to catastrophic tire failures, such as blowouts. Therefore, check tire pressure and tread wear once a

— National Highway Traffic Safety Administration



You should check your tire





He lost his eyesight and an arm to the war on terrorism, but he wishes he was still in the fight

By TIM BARELAW
Photos by Tech. Sgt. MATTHEW HANNEN

A victim of a terrorist's improvised explosive device, Staff Sgt. Matt Slaydon had his left arm amputated and is completely blind (his left eye was replaced by a plastic prosthetic).



Whenever Matt goes through a tough moment, he has Annette to lean on. Below, roadside bombs, such as this one which detonated in Iraq, continue to kill or injure U.S. servicemembers fighting the war on terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan. The picture of Slaydon inset at right is how he will always remember himself, because he will never see his injured body.

Staff Sgt. Matt Slaydon took a moment to compose himself.
Tears rolled down cheeks that bore the disfiguring scars of a battle fought far from home.

Nobody could begrudge him a moment or two to mourn. After all, he'd given up a lot to this war on terrorism. The improvised explosive device that blew up just a couple of feet from his face unmercifully claimed his left arm and left eye. It cost him his eyesight in his right eye as well, rendering him completely and permanently blind.

But he didn't get choked up because of a lost limb or because he'd spend the rest of his days in total darkness. He wept because he would never again be a part of the "bomb squad."

Slaydon, an explosive ordnance disposal technician from Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., received his injuries from a terrorist's IED Oct. 24 while deployed to northern Iraq. He doesn't routinely feel sorry for himself when it comes to the multiple mutilations he endured. Instead, he actually says he feels somewhat fortunate, because the bomb, which partially misfired, should have turned him "into a pink mist."

He does admit, however, that his stomach still sometimes gets tied up in knots when he has to face never again being an active member of the EOD team and mission.

"I loved being part of the bomb squad ... loved it, loved it, loved it! Even when it sucked, it was great," he said. He swallowed hard and his shoulders slumped. "I'd never had such a sense of purpose. ... I was saving lives."

Slaydon was no stranger to Iraq or the terrorists' weapon of choice — the IED. On his third deployment there, he had already been involved in disabling and destroying about 65 of these deadly bombs. He'd been on 147 off-base combat missions, including two "bullets-whizzing-by-your-head" firefights that ended with four dead terrorists.

He had volunteered for this third deployment, just like the two before that, and had already informed his wife that he'd be signing up for a fourth.

"When it came to deploying for EOD, he was like that little kid in class who always raised his hand when the teacher needed a helper," said Annette, his wife of eight years. "Was I scared for him? Sure. The first time he deployed I watched CNN obsessively and barely slept. But who would I be, especially as his wife, to say, 'No, you can't have your dream.' I wouldn't do that in a million



Indeed, Slaydon, a self-proclaimed adrenalin junkie, said being on the bomb squad in a hostile environment is what he was born to do.

Outside the Wire

Slaydon arrived in Iraq June 3, 2007, and was four and a half months into his third tour of duty there when he went on

"Was I scared for him?
Sure. The first time he
deployed I watched CNN
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I wouldn't do that in a
million years."

the mission that changed his life forever.

As part of their duties to clear paths for military convoys, they "were called on to check out a suspicious sign at a particularly bad intersection of road where insurgents had planted multiple IEDs in the past," he said. "The sign basically expressed anti-American sentiments."

Slaydon led a team of three EOD technicians, as well as a weapons intelligence specialist. And he readily admits that he chomped at the bit to go on missions "outside the wire" — outside the safety of the base perimeter.

"It's not that I'm crazy or had a death wish," he said. "We get excited to put our training to the test and save lives."

After arriving on scene and taking a long, careful look at the sign from the protective cocoon of their heavily armored joint EOD rapid response vehicle, it appeared to be harmless. But not one to leave things to chance, Slaydon made the call to deploy the EOD robot to pull the sign out of the ground.

"The robot has zoom cameras on it, so it allows us to safely take a closer look at anything suspicious," he said.

Near the sign, the robot's camera showed a pothole with freshly disturbed earth. The team had the robot drop an explosive charge on the suspiciouslooking pothole. Then they had the robot back off so they could detonate the charge.

"There was nothing in the pothole,"

Slaydon said. "It was just filled with dirt."

They also had the robot pull the sign out of the ground.

Nothing happened.

Slaydon then decided to get out of the truck and recover the sign.

"If you don't take the sign with you, you'll have to respond to it again," he said.

Slaydon said it's always the job of the team leader to get out of the vehicle.

"It's known as the 'long walk,' and they want the most experienced guy out there because it's dangerous," he said.

He exited the vehicle, and the weapons intelligence specialist followed. But something caught Slaydon's attention, and he quickly ordered the intel troop to take cover.

Whatever he saw prompted him to take out his titanium mine probe, which basically looks like a 2-foot-long needle with a handle on the end of it.

"I don't know what caught my eye, but I knelt down and slid the probe into the suspicious area," Slaydon said.

The ground in front of him exploded.

After the Explosion

Shrapnel, dirt and sand blew with such force that the blast seemed intent on ripping Slaydon's face off.

Inside the truck, EOD technicians Senior Airmen Patrick Loveless and Edison Corbo, both deployed from Travis AFB, Calif., heard and felt the blast as it shook the vehicle.

"You see the cloud of dust, and for a split second, you're thinking, 'What happened? Who's hurt? What do we do now?' "said Corbo, a 22-year-old who was on his first deployment.

While Loveless radioed the patrol to send a medic, Corbo jumped out of the truck to help his team leader.

"I saw Sergeant Slaydon lying on the ground," Corbo said. "His face was torn up, and his head was red with blood."

And it only got worse.



Annette has become somewhat of an expert at putting drops in her husband's right eye after having to do so for at least every hour, 24 hours a day, for four weeks straight. Below, Matt's life has transformed into a constant juggling act of medical appointments and long stints in hospital waiting rooms, but Annette has been at his side through it all — even to provide a tender kiss or two.





Occupational therapist Chris Ebner stretches Slaydon's shoulder to try to improve the movement and mobility of his injured arm.

Slaydon's left arm seemingly hung on by a thread, as two tendons were the only thing keeping it from being completely severed. His face looked as though someone had taken a hammer claw to it. Multiple puncture wounds left gaping holes that allowed those working on him to see into his fractured sinus

cavity. His nose had been peeled open, and a chunk of his ear was missing. The orbital bones around his eyes were shattered. His left eye had been practically torn out, while the right took shrapnel deep into the socket. The blast broke his jaw in two places, and busted up his front teeth, as well. The force of the explosion caused the lining of his chest cavity to hemorrhage, and blood started to pool internally.

A medic, who had been with a nearby Army patrol, put a tourniquet on

Slaydon's mangled arm and did his best to bandage the numerous facial lacerations. Corbo, meanwhile, tried to keep his team leader from going into shock.

"He was awake, and he was in a lot of agony," Corbo said.

Through clenched teeth, Slaydon begged them to make the pain go away.

> "If I could get just one eye back, I'd go to Iraq with this claw in a flat second."

"I tried to take his mind off the pain and keep him from going into shock by talking to him about his wife and family," Corbo said. "It was a tough

situation. I've seen guys injured before, but it's different when it's someone you've spent nearly five months with inside the close confines of a truck."

Corbo and Loveless also helped the medic strip Slaydon of his body armor, which had shrapnel embedded in it.

While his teammates, the medic and an Army doctor who had rushed to the scene desperately tried to keep Slaydon alive, a medical evacuation chopper arrived.

"I didn't know if he'd make it; he'd lost so much blood," Corbo said. "All I could think of is let's get him patched up and get him out of there, so he might have a fighting chance."

The Journey Home to His Wife

In the helicopter that was headed to Kirkuk Air Base, Iraq, Slaydon's heart stopped. The medevac team had to do chest compressions in flight to get his heart beating again.

When he arrived at Kirkuk, doctors cut a hole in his chest to release the pooling blood. That relieved pressure on his heart and lungs, helping to stabilize him.



Then they flew him to Balad AB, Iraq, where he underwent 12 hours of surgery. Doctors were forced to amputate his left arm and remove what remained of his left eye. They wired his broken jaw shut. They performed a tracheotomy, cutting a hole in his neck to insert a breathing tube.

From Balad, he flew to Landstuhl. Germany, and then to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

While doctors worked to save Slavdon's life, Luke AFB officials notified Annette that her husband had been injured.

She found out Oct. 25, a day after the IED exploded.

A paralegal, she was at her office in downtown Phoenix when she got a call from the 56th Civil Engineering Squadron commander.

"The first thing I thought was, 'He's calling to invite me to a barbecue," "she said. "Then it hit me ... why would (the commander) be calling me for that? At that point my heart just kind of leapt."

The commander told her that Matt had been wounded, but that he was stable. He didn't want to elaborate over the phone and asked to meet with her.

"I was crying too hard to give him directions, so someone else from my office had to do it," she said.

A five-member military entourage consisting of the group, CES, and medical group commanders, as well as a base chaplain and Slaydon's officer in charge, arrived at her office soon afterward.

"The group commander held my hand and told me that Matt had lost an arm and an eye, and that they were trying to save the right eye," Annette said with a shaky voice as tears streamed down her face.

The next few days were a whirlwind as Annette prepared to reunite with her critically injured husband.

"I found out on a Thursday morning; I didn't sleep that night, and I didn't sleep Friday or Saturday," Annette said.

So on Sunday when she finally saw her husband for the first time in nearly five months, she said she "was kind of delirious and emotionally spent."

"It was shocking, because even though I knew he was injured, I thought I would be able to recognize him," she said. "But he looked nothing like himself."

His face was swollen to the size of a pumpkin and carved up like one too. Annette forced herself to study him.

"I needed to find something familiar," she said. "So I sat down next to him and stared really hard. I wanted to see him."

It wasn't easy. Besides all of the distorting wounds, Matt was hooked up to a respirator, IV and monitors to track his

vitals. He had so many tubes and wires protruding from his broken body that it resembled a mad scientist experiment gone wrong.

Finally, her eyes rested on the top of his head.

"That's the one thing that looked familiar," she said. "The top of his head still looked like him. I know it sounds silly, but you grab onto anything vou can."

Wrought with worry over the thought of losing her husband, those first few days with him weren't much more than a blur.

"I remember being by his bedside so thankful he was alive, but also afraid to touch him." Annette said. "He was so swollen I was afraid I'd hurt him more. Plus, I had an awful cold

— probably from stress and loss of sleep - and he was already so compromised that I feared I'd make him even sicker."

So she would scrub her hands like a neurotic germaphobe, just so she could hold her husband's hand. She would talk to him even though he was still unconscious.

The 'Awakening'

Slaydon slipped in and out of consciousness for days, but he has no memory of the three weeks after the bomb nearly erased him.

"My brain got rattled around quite a

bit from the blast," he said. "Some posttraumatic amnesia is fairly common with that type of injury."

His first post-bomb memory is of his wife telling him his arm was amputated. "Of course, he doesn't remember the



To help him get used to using his prosthetic arm, Slaydon stains a wooden clock and does other crafts and tasks to help him become more self-sufficient.

million times I told him that I loved him," Annette said with a chuckle.

"I was actually conscious and communicating before Annette told me about my arm, but I was still in delirium and confused," he said. "My mouth was wired shut, everything was dark, and I didn't yet grasp what was going on. But those words cut through all the haze."

He said he didn't freak out or panic. He just lay in his bed, and soaked it in for awhile. Then he reached over with his right hand and felt his stump.

"It was just such a big piece of news that I think it snapped me back to reality," he said. "It was all so overwhelming."



Slaydon has been determined in his recovery efforts, as shown here in physical therapy at the Center for the Intrepid at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio.



The Slaydons renewed their marriage vows April 11 in the base chapel at Randolph AFB, Texas.

The New Reality

A week after the IED explosion, Matt, accompanied by Annette, flew via C-17 to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio Oct. 31 to continue his recovery.

In the days following his injuries, a plastic prosthetic replaced Matt's left eye. When efforts to restore sight in his right eye failed, doctors offered to remove it and replace it with a prosthetic as well.

"But I couldn't bring myself to part with it," he said. He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "It just seemed creepy to me to have no eyes ... like some kind of monster movie."

So he chose to keep it even though that decision meant more surgery and pain.

"One of the worst things that happened to me was having my eyelid sewn shut while I was awake," he said, cringing at the thought. "I had to lay there while they stuck needles into my eyelid."

Later, after doctors reopened the eye, medicating drops had to be put in it every 30 minutes, 24 hours a day so it wouldn't dry out and to treat a fungal infection. That lasted for about a week. Then, they had to do it every hour for three weeks.

"I would set an alarm and get up at night to do the eye drops," Annette said. "I'd get three or four drops on his cheek before one finally went in, but we got those damn eye drops in, I'll tell you that!" she said with a laugh.

"She worked her butt off," Matt said. "It would have been easier on everyone if I had just elected to have the eye removed. But everyone understood and supported my decision. Annette did great; she's really been there for me through all of this."

While still going through recovery with more surgeries and an exhausting schedule of recurring medical appointments ranging from physical therapy to dental to mental health and more, Matt was able to piece together what went wrong in Iraq.

"I found out that the sign was actually hooked up to a pull switch," he said. "It should have gone off when the sign was pulled from the ground by the robot. When that failed, it literally could have been a grain of sand that was holding the switch open. So when I put in my probe, I disturbed the switch and

it snapped shut. Then ... BOOM!" Any regrets?

"There's a million woulda, coulda, shouldas," he said. "But I'd rather find it and suffer these injuries, than have some 19-year-old kid step on it and get wounded or killed because I missed it. I couldn't live with that."

Most days he is able to shrug off the severity of his wounds and even put a positive spin on his new reality. But accepting that he has lost his dream job?

That's another story.

"If I could get just one eye back, I'd go to Iraq with this claw in a flat second," Slaydon said, waving the prosthetic attached to what is left of the arm that had been severed above the elbow.

He paused, the lump in his throat momentarily robbing him of speech. He shifted uncomfortably, and then apologized for getting emotional.

"That's one of the hardest pills to swallow," the 37-year-old said. "I can't be an EOD technician anymore. ... Ever ..."

His voice cracked as it trailed off, and the finality of his words lingered in the silence. Then he shook his head as if trying to rid himself of this moment of vulnerability.

"I went from being in sixth gear, going on combat raids, to being slammed in

reverse with my injuries. So sometimes the gears grind," he said. "Do I get pissed off? Sure, sometimes my mood turns dark."

It doesn't help that he planned on being a "lifer" in the Air Force.

"They were gonna have to kick me out at 30 years," he said. "So sometimes when I'm laying on the couch staring at nothing, you might hear me yell a few choice obscenities."

But just because he will face a medical retirement somewhere down the line, that doesn't mean he's given up. He still wants to be involved with the military, albeit in a different fashion.

"I'm going back to school to get a doctorate in clinical psychology,"

"There's a million woulda, coulda, shouldas. But I'd rather find (the IED) and suffer these injuries, than have some 19-yearold kid step on it and get wounded or killed because I missed it. I couldn't live with that."

said Slavdon, who in January was awarded the Purple Heart, the Air Force Combat Action Medal and two Army Commendation medals, one with valor, by Gen. William R. Looney III, commander of Air Education and Training Command. "I want to work with the Veteran's Administration to help troops suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. They'll take one look at me, and I'll have instant credibility."

Then, they can sit back, relax and tell each other their stories ... from war hero to war hero.



Catching a wave or two, Matt and Annette enjoyed a second honeymoon in Hawaii following the renewal of their marriage vows.

COMMON KILLER

IMPROVISED EXPLOSIVE DEVICES AREN'T THE ONLY THREATS TO U.S. FORCES

Improvised explosive devices in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken a toll on deployed U.S. servicemembers fighting the war on terrorism. In Iraq alone, more than 1,790 Americans lost their lives to these deadly bombs from July 2003 to June 2008, and hundreds more, such as Staff Sgt. Matt Slaydon from Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., have been injured. But at least Slaydon. an explosive ordnance disposal technician, and other casualties of this on-going battle didn't sustain their wounds in vain.

The same can't be said for all U.S. armed forces warriors. While the nation mourns its heroes who are wounded in battle, many people barely blink when it comes to the number of Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines the United States is losing to non-combat preventable mishaps each year right at their own doorsteps. In roughly the same period as the IED statistics, the Air Force alone saw 411 of its men and women die in preventable mishaps, according the Air Force Safety Center. Of those, 290, or 71 percent, happened in an alltoo-common place ... cars, trucks, vans, sport utility vehicles and motorcycles.

"Year after year, too many of our people are dying unnecessarily," said Col. John W. Blumentritt, Air Education and Training Command director of safety. "Historically, we lose more people to preventable mishaps than we do to enemy forces."

Yes, IEDs conjure fear, but the losses the services have suffered on the roadways should also "raise the hair on your neck," the colonel said.

"Many times, our men and women do everything right and still become a victim of someone else's poor decisions on the road," Blumentritt said. "However, all too often, our servicemembers are their own worst enemies."

The safety director explained that too many of the nation's defenders drive too fast, too fatigued, too distracted, too

aggressive or after one too many alcoholic beverages. Then if they forget to strap on a seat belt or wear a motorcycle helmet, the errors in judgment continue to mount and head for a tragic conclusion.

Case in point, one of the Airmen who died this fiscal year was a passenger in a vehicle where the driver fell asleep at the wheel. The Airman wasn't wearing a seat belt and was ejected from the vehicle. In another fatality, an Airman who had been drinking alcohol lost control of his vehicle, veered off the road and struck a tree. Then there was an Airman who hit a guardrail while riding his motorcycle, was ejected and fell 125 feet, with his body striking a telephone pole before landing hard in a grassy area.

While driving mishaps are by far the worst, they aren't the only way Airmen have succumbed to accidents.

This fiscal year alone, the Air Force lost a first lieutenant who struck a tree while snow skiing; a master sergeant who was working on his car when it fell off the hydraulic jack and crushed him; a staff sergeant who had been drinking at a local bar, then sat on a railroad tie next to train tracks and was hit by a train; a one-striper who was accidentally shot in the abdomen at his off-base residence; and two Airmen who were involved in recreational water tragedies – one while kayaking, the other while snorkeling.

'These Airmen didn't die because they were targeted by a terrorist's bomb while courageously facing the enemy on the battlefield," Blumentritt said. "In the case of preventable mishaps, all too often they were killed by their own hands. But that's why we call them preventable mishaps; the good news is that we can do something about them simply by doing risk assessments and making better choices."

- Tim Barela



Dealing with roadside bombs is part of the danger Airmen face while deployed in combat areas, but sometimes the roadways back home aren't much friendlier. Twenty Air Force members already have died this fiscal year in preventable vehicle mishaps.

Waiting for Mom to





Boy grows up fearing his mother would perish in a drunk driving crash; and sadly, time eventually ran out ... and she did

By GEORGE WOODWARD
Illustration by SAMMIE W. KING

didn't cry when my mother died.
Not that I wasn't sad – I had just been expecting it for too long. Since I was 5, in fact.

On the Christmas after my fifth birthday, my older sister and I stood outside the skating rink three hours after it closed, waiting for Mom to pick us up. A police officer finally pulled up, told us to get in his patrol car and said our mother had been in an accident.

It wasn't her first "accident," and it definitely wasn't her last. But it was the first time I remember thinking, "I wonder if she's dead."

I realized then that alcohol would kill my mother; I just didn't know when. For the next 20 years, that cold anticipation proved to be slow torture.

I waited a lot as I grew up ... after school, when all the teachers were gone and it was starting to get dark ... after soccer practice, when someone else's mom would finally get angry or worried enough to drive me home.

The worst was waiting at home, sometimes for days, not knowing if she was dead or simply too drunk to find her way back.

Inevitably, a car would pull up, and either Mom would stumble out or we would stumble in.

With the twisted logic of a child, I always chose to go with her when I could – especially after my sister left home. I was in more accidents before age 16 than most people witness in a lifetime. But somehow, the bruised ribs and broken arms were less painful than the waiting.

It's a miracle I survived to age 25, but I did. And now there I was, watching the nurses wash my mother's face and unplug the IVs and monitors.

I hugged my brother and sister – they weren't crying, either – and walked to the hospital chapel. I prayed for my mom.

I prayed for forgiveness, too; because along with the grief, I felt an equal measure of relief. ... Relief that the waiting was over. ... Relief that somehow, the only person she had killed was herself.

"I was in more accidents before age 15 than most people witness in a lifetime.

But somehow, the bruised ribs and broken arms were less painful than the waiting."

This is an awful thing to feel at the death of your mother.

I'm pushing 40 now, and I have four kids who will never know their grandmother – never hear her play Pagliacci on the piano or taste the greatest oatmeal cookies the world has ever known. Sometimes they ask about her. What was she like? I still don't know how to answer.

I do know that every time I hear about a drunk driver, my first thought is, "Who is waiting?"

Is there a 5-year-old boy somewhere watching a police car roll silently up the driveway? Is there a husband or wife somewhere tossing nervously in bed, watching the clock slowly tick its way to sunrise?

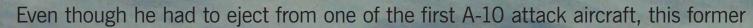
Every time you drink and drive, you put lives at risk, including your own and those of everyone else on the road. But even if, by the grace of God, you somehow make it home without hurting yourself or someone else, you are slowly killing someone who loves you.

Someone, somewhere ... waiting.

Nationwide drunk driving statistics for 2006

- There were 13,470 fatalities in crashes involving an alcohol-impaired driver (blood-alcohol content of .08 or higher) 32 percent of total traffic fatalities for the year.
- More than 16,000 people were killed in alcohol-related motor vehicle traffic crashes (BAC of .01 or higher).
- There was an average of one alcohol-impaired-driving fatality every 39 minutes.
- The rate of alcohol impairment among drivers involved in fatal crashes was four times higher at night than during the day.
- The percentage of drivers with BAC of .08 or above in fatal crashes was highest for motorcycle operators (27 percent), followed by light trucks (24 percent), and then passenger cars (23 percent).
 - National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Mr. Woodward is with the 82nd Training Wing Public Affairs at Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas.



By Tech. Sgt. PARKER GYOKERES Photo by Capt. JUSTIN T. WATSON Digital image manipulation by DAVID M. STACK







A video of Maj. Gen. Francis Gideon ejecting from an A-10 some 30 years ago is still shown to pilots today.

aj. Gen. Francis Gideon holds the dubious honor of being the first pilot to successfully eject from an A-10 Thunderbolt II. Even though the experience destroyed his aircraft and nearly killed him, the general remains a strong advocate of the aircraft affectionately known as the "Warthog."

In 1978, Gideon, who retired in 2000 as the Air Force's chief of safety and now resides in Twin Falls, Idaho, was one of the first test pilots assigned to the A-10 joint task force. He retold his story during a visit to Moody Air Force Base, Ga., in March.

During the early years of the A-10A program, a common problem with the gun system was known as secondary gun gas ignition, or unburned propellant re-igniting outside the confines of the gun, the general said. The glitch produced a large fireball and a pocket of hot gas that could snuff out an engine.

"In an effort to combat the risks of (secondary gun gas ignition), the test wing was tasked with validating three different manufacturers of new ammunition," Gideon said.

The first passes went off without a hitch. But when the general fired the third manufacturer's rounds, his aircraft experienced the dreaded secondary gun gas ignition.

"I immediately let go of the trigger," he said. "These gasses went straight into my engines, and I had a dual engine compressor stall."



An A-10C full mission trainer operator at Moody AFB, Ga., Steven Callich, right, highlights features of the digitally-upgraded ground attack aircraft to retired Maj. Gen Francis Gideon, former A-10A test pilot. The general retired in 2000 as the Air Force chief of safety.

While there had been instances of a single engine failure from gas ingestion, this proved to be the first time both engines had failed in this circumstance, the general said.

A compressor stall occurs when airflow through an engine ceas-

"Pretty much every A-10 pilot since that day has seen the footage of my ejection."

es. In addition to the major side-effect of losing all thrust needed for sustained flight, the engines continue to burn fuel and will overheat rapidly if left uncorrected.

"I saw my temperature gauges peg, so I chopped the power, performed all of my emergency procedures and realized I had no steps remaining until the engines cooled down," he said. "So I sat there, for two long minutes, with absolutely nothing to do but lose altitude and watch the temp gauges slowly fall back into range."

As the aircraft's engines cooled enough to start relighting, the plane quickly sank below 2,000 feet. To make matters worse, a mountain ridge loomed in the flight path.

As Gideon began the process of starting one engine, he realized it would take another 45 seconds to produce usable thrust. After doing the math for a successful recovery of his sinking airplane, it just didn't add up.

He announced his decision to eject.

"Seeing what was coming, the (pilot in the) camera chase-plane was considerate enough to position himself perfectly up-sun for the ideal shot of me coming out of the aircraft," the general said. "Pretty much every A-10 pilot since that day has seen the footage of my ejection."

The ejection seat the general used was an older style seat called an Escapac. At the time, it was being replaced in front-line A-10s with the newer ACES-II seat because of safety concerns. His test airframe was not slated for upgrade until the end of the program.

"A number of pilots had already been killed trying to eject from the A-10 in an Escapac, but I was in the proper envelope and prepared in every way possible," he said. "Still, the ejection slammed my head down into my chest and left me in quite a bit of pain."

Upon landing, the back of his neck struck a rock. Flight doctors believed this caused his most severe injury — a broken neck.

Following the mishap, the program to upgrade the ejection seat was accelerated, he said.



Additionally, the Air Force began looking at better gun-gas diverters designed to push the blast fumes below the aircraft instead of above it and into its engines. Manufacturers also created new propellant mixtures that were less prone to secondary gun gas ignition, but the general recalls these produced problems of their own.

"The new compounds in the propellant were sticky and caustic after firing," he said. "They would get on the engine blades and cause damage, so after every flight they had to be scrubbed off."

Additionally, every time they fired the gun, the windshields would get covered with a sticky film that blocked their vision, Gideon added.

"We ended up strapping a five-gallon plastic tank full of alcohol wash into the nose wheel well and hooking a windshield washer pump to it," the general said. "You would get five shots of the stuff, and it gave you a small spot on the windscreen so you could fly home."

That windshield washing system has since been upgraded with engine gasses to blast soot cleaner over the windshield. But the tank is still mounted in the same place they rigged the first one — the nose wheel well.

"(After 28 years), the resources and weapons available to today's generation of pilots bring a level of complexity and information

"The A-10 is an amazing jet to have done so well for so long."

into the cockpit that I never dealt with," the general said. "The A-10 is an amazing jet to have done so well for so long."

Late in his career when Gideon went on to command the Air Force Safety Center at Kirtland AFB, N.M., his aircraft wreckage also was shipped to the center to be used as a training tool for accident investigators. On the last day of his Air Force career, man and mangled machine crossed paths one last time.

"As it turns out, my retirement date was exactly 20 years to the day after my accident," the general said. "The safety staff at Kirtland removed a blade from one of my engines and mounted it on a plaque that said, 'Together again, after all these years.' "

Sergeant Gyokeres is with the 23rd Wing Public Affairs at Moody AFB, Ga. (ACCNS)

New Wings to Secure A-10 Longevity

LANGLEY AIR FORCE BASE. Va. (ACCNS) - New wings are the answer to Air Force concerns on the aging A-10 Thunderbolt II. an airframe flying since 1975.

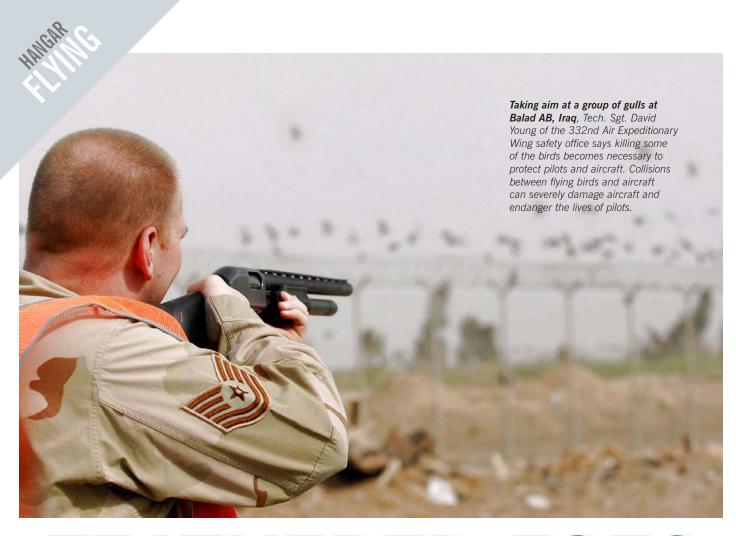
The Air Force awarded a contract to Boeing last year requiring 242 new A-10 wings constructed and delivered to depots for installment on the thin-skinned airframes by 2011. This upgrade is expected to keep the aircraft flying until about 2030.

Not all 356 of the Air Force's A-10s require new wings because more than 100 airframes were constructed in the 1980s with "thick skin," giving them a stronger structure, said Master Sgt. Steven Grimes, A-10 maintenance liaison for Air Combat Command.

A-10s also are undergoing modernization. The old airframe is midway through a major upgrade to a more capable A-10C. It boasts the latest technology of smart weapons, including GPS-guided bombs and all-weather capability.

Furthermore, the sturdy airframe design enables the A-10 to operate from austere airfields and take battle damage without degrading capability. Examples of its survivability include armor, self-sealing fuel cells protected by foam, manual flight control systems that back up hydraulic controls, and a ballistic tub surrounding the cockpit.

— Tech. Sgt. Russell Wicke, Air Combat Command Public Affairs



STUDY OF IRAQ BIRDS TO HELP REDUCE AIRCRAFT MISHAPS

By 1st. Lt. LISA SPILINEK / Photos by Senior Airman JULIANNE SHOWALTER

ne of the Air Force's greatest airpower adversaries doesn't wear the uniform of another country; it wears feathers. Both deadly and expensive, aircraft accidents and mishaps caused by collisions with birds have cost the service approximately \$35 million each year since 1985, according to Air Force safety records. So what happens when U.S. forces deploy to foreign lands at locations such as Balad Air Base, Irag, where they aren't as familiar with the local wildlife as they are back home?

"Bird strikes have a very negative impact on the mission," said Capt. Andrew Baumgart, a 23rd Expeditionary Fighter Squadron F-16 Fighting Falcon pilot. "In the best case scenario, they will cause additional maintenance man-hours for minor repairs, inspections and cleanup. In the worst case scenario. they can cause the loss of a multimillion dollar warfighting asset. Either way it has a very negative impact on our ability to generate more sorties and



A northern wheatear is one of many types of birds that calls Balad home. Even small birds can pose a threat to flying aircraft because they can be sucked into engines and render them useless.

continued air coverage for our guys on the ground."

To better understand their winged rivals, Air Force safety personnel have for years shipped feather, blood and tissue samples from bird strikes and bird depredation efforts to be analyzed at the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Feather Identification Laboratory in Washington, D.C. Sometimes the remains of whole birds also were shipped to the laboratory to be studied from locations in the United States, but never from Iraq ... until now.

Members of the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing safety office at Balad sent their first shipment of whole bird carcasses, obtained through bird depredation efforts, to the Feather Lab May 3, said Tech. Sgt. David Young, the 332nd AEW noncommissioned officer in charge of flight safety, who is deployed from Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska.

The sergeant heads up the Balad AB Bird Aircraft Strike Hazard program, better known as BASH,

through which trained volunteers shoot birds that pose threats to aircraft. The Feather Lab experts will examine the more than 40 birds shipped from Balad to determine what species live in the

The shipment represents a win-win situation for the Smithsonian and the busy air base, where multiple types of aircraft take off and land 24/7. According to Young, 124 bird strikes were recorded on Balad AB aircraft from October 2006 to October 2007.

"Sending (the birds) to the Smithsonian will help establish what the species are here and their migratory routes," Young said. "We don't have that kind of data here."

The data on the shipped birds will be compiled and evaluated by the Smithsonian laboratory experts and provided to the Balad

AB safety office. Understanding the types of birds that live near Balad's extremely busy runways will help the safety personnel take actions to reduce their nesting habitats and bring down the bird populations around the airfield.

Additionally, if mission requirements permit, flights could be scheduled to avoid peak hours of bird activity, said Lt. Col. Ken Ekman, the 332nd AEW Safety chief, who is deployed from Shaw AFB, S.C.

The Smithsonian will benefit from the whole bird shipment, as well. Of the 620,000 bird specimens that it currently has, only eight are from Iraq and those represent only four species,

said Dr. Carla Dove of the Smithsonian's Feather Lab.

"Whole bird samples are the basis of all taxonomic and systematic research on birds," she said. "The birds are skinned, stuffed with cotton and kept in the museum collection forever. Having these specimens available for study will be a great benefit to our identification program and to the study of birds of that region. When specimens are catalogued into our collections, they are available for researchers all over the world to come to study or to borrow for examination."

Another benefit of receiving whole birds is that experts can match unknown specimen feathers to whole bird samples.

"Whole specimens benefit the bird strike identification program tremendously," Dove said. "I plan to use the specimens (from Balad) to obtain the DNA sequence to add to our database. That way, even if we get a small blood or tissue sample that does not have feathers, we can possibly get an identification using the DNA."

While some of the types of birds sent from Balad are yet to be determined by Dove and the rest of the identification experts at the Feather Lab, they have been able to identify some from

photographs taken by Young. These include white wagtails, whitecheeked bulbuls, falcated teals, Egyptian nightjars, black-headed gulls, blue-cheeked bee-eaters, white-breasted kingfishers, golden orioles, stone curlews, shrikes, European rollers, spur-winged plovers and red-wattled plovers. The rest will be identified after arriving in Washington D.C.

In the end, the science behind identification will help the safety personnel at Balad to understand the local area airpower challeng-

"By understanding the exact species of birds that cause problems to aircraft and flight safety, we can begin to do things to prevent the damage from occurring," Dove said. "The flight safety group will use the data to understand the movements and migra-

> tory patterns of birds and to know which bird species are causing problems. Species identification is the first step in bird strike prevention."

For pilots, the experience of hitting a bird can be troubling.

"Hitting a bird while flying is difficult to describe," said Baumgart, who is deployed from Spangdahlem AB, Germany. "When you're flying 200 to 300 knots, you either never see the bird or you see just streaks of black as they fly by. The unsettling part is not knowing the extent of the damage when you know you've hit one."

The captain has firsthand experience on this.

"Not too long ago, I hit a (large hawk) on my approach to landing," he said. "What concerned me was that I never even saw it. I just felt a dull thud. After landing, the crew said the bird was wrapped around the top of my nose gear. Another 6, or maybe 9 inches higher, and it would have gone right down the intake, destroying the motor. There was minor damage to the nose gear."

While the Balad AB safety personnel realize that eliminating the threat of bird strikes altogether is impossible, they are doing their best to mitigate the risks of bird strikes occurring.

"Safety is about reacting to mishaps and preventing future mishaps," Ekman said. "The Smithsonian lacks specimens and data on bird migratory patterns in Iraq. By feeding the Smithsonian info and helping them build their database for species collection, we in turn can be much more preventative in our actions to counter Balad's bird population."

For Young, it's a matter of risk management.

"We can't get rid of (the bird problem); we can only try to minimize it," he said. "It's about making it safer for our pilots."

Still, the sergeant has learned a lot about his fowl foes.

"I didn't even know there were different types of gulls," Young

said. "I thought they were all seagulls. I've learned more about birds here than I have in my whole life — their habitats and migratory patterns."

More importantly, he's learning how to combat them to keep American pilots and airplanes safer in the sky over Irag.

Lieutenant Spilinek is with the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs at Balad AB, Iraq. (AFPN)





OFFICIALS CONCERNED WITH ALARMING NUMBER OF AIRCRAFT CRASHES, FATALITIES

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RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas — With eight major aircraft crashes this fiscal year, three of which claimed the lives of five Air Education and Training Command pilots, the 19th Air Force commander said he is "concerned about recent mishap trends."

Maj. Gen. Irving L. Halter Jr. ordered a one-day safety standdown May 5 throughout 19th Air Force after two T-38 crashes took the lives of four pilots in the span of eight days. Additionally, command officials suspended T-38 flights May 1. Gen. William R. Looney III, AETC commander, lifted the flight suspension May 6 after initial information indicated that the crashes were not related.

The first T-38 mishap happened at Columbus Air Force Base,

Miss., April 23; the second occurred at Sheppard AFB, Texas, May 1. These mishaps followed two T-6As colliding in the air at Columbus Nov. 28 (both aircraft lost) and two F-16 crashes near Luke AFB, Ariz., March 14 and April 2 (the first of which also claimed the life of the pilot). The seventh downed aircraft involved a Laughlin AFB, Texas, T-1, which crashed at Lubbock International Airport May 21. Then on June 4, the eighth plane, another T-6A, went down at Vance AFB, Okla.

life-and-death drama." According to Col. John W. Blumentritt, AETC director of safety, the mishaps are under investigation to determine the exact cause, with the exception of the T-6A midair, which wrapped up its inves-

"During an investigation, a board of experts gathers all the evidence and then carefully analyzes it to determine causes and contributing factors," the colonel said. "From this data, we can learn from mistakes that might have been made and track and attack any disturbing trends."

tigation in March and was attributed to pilot error (see related story

Blumentritt also stressed that sharing investigation findings with the aviation community is a critical part of any future mishap prevention efforts.

In a letter to all 19th Air Force instructors, Halter, commenting on the recent crashes and fatalities, said, "Even in the world's fourth biggest air force, with over 1,700 assigned aircraft and 35,000 professionals executing over half a million flying hours a year, such losses are well beyond the norm. It is time to slow down, take stock and gather our wits."

He went on to say that despite the advances made in flying safety, training and aircraft performance, aviation remains an

> inherently risky profession. He added that even the newest aircraft break and almost always at the least convenient time.

> "Professional Airmen have to be ready, at a moment's notice, for the unexpected event which makes a 'routine' task into a seconds-to-decide, life-and-death drama," Halter said. "And they must avoid, at all costs, putting themselves into a position which allows little to no margin for error."

On that note, the general said he has the utmost confidence that the command's aviation community can right the ship.

"Every day you execute thousands of sorties and tens of thousands of events with great discipline and airmanship," he said. "You produce the world's best aircrews under challenging conditions. I am constantly amazed at your professionalism and

"I have great trust and confidence in your abilities, as does General Looney. But in this business, 'You are only as good as your last game.'"

— Tim Barela





While an accident investigation board is still ongoing, Air Force and Air Combat Command maintenance and safety experts gave the 509th Bomb Wing the green light to fly.

Col. Tom Bussiere, 509th Operations Group commander, and Maj. Rich Collins, 394th Combat Training Squadron operations officer, took the Spirit of Florida to the skies April 15 in the first flight since the Spirit of Kansas crashed on takeoff at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, Feb. 23.

"We wanted our return to flying to be deliberate and safe," Brig. Gen. Gary Harencak, 509th Bomb Wing commander said.

B-2s have been flying almost 20 years and are renowned in the Air Force for their unprecedented safety record, the general said.

"In the history of aviation, there's never been an aircraft with

"These bombers combined have a logged more than 14,000 sorties, 100 combat sorties and 75,000 flying hours without a single Class A mishap until now."

A mishap is categorized as Class A when there is loss of life or damage in excess of \$1 million. The B-2, valued at more than \$1 billion, had two pilots on board. Both ejected safely. There were no injuries to ground personnel.

— Airman 1st Class Stephen Linch 509th Bomb Wing Public Affairs A B-2 Spirit soars after a refueling mission over the Pacific Ocean. The bomber aircraft, from the 509th Bomb Wing at Whiteman AFB, Mo., is part of a continuous bomber presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

SAME PLACE, SAME TIME

WHAT LED TO T-6A MIDAIR COLLISION?

RANDOLPH AIR FORCE BASE, Texas (AETCNS) — Air Force officials have completed the investigation of the Nov. 28 T-6A Texan II midair collision near Gunshy Auxiliary Field, Miss., which resulted in the loss of both aircraft.

In March, the accident investigation board determined the cause of this mishap was a result of a "failure to clear."

"In other words," said Maj. Michael Cranston of Air Education and Training Command's flight safety office, "the T-6A pilots found themselves in the same place at the same time."

A T-6A manned by a student pilot and instructor pilot, both

assigned to the 41st Flying Training Squadron at Columbus Air Force Base, Miss., missed seeing another T-6A in the traffic pattern. This second aircraft, also with a student pilot and instructor pilot, was flying straight and level when the collision occurred. At that time, both instructor pilots initiated the

ejection sequence and all four crew members ejected from their aircraft.

All four pilots sustained minor injuries from the ejection, but those injuries were limited to superficial burns and abrasions.

Both aircraft, valued at \$5 million each, were a total loss, and property damage was limited to ground scarring and fuel and hydraulic contamination.

Four pilots safely ejected when two T-6A training aircraft collided in midair.



